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ABSTRACT

Based on the idea that studying actual persons reading for their own purposes can shed light on such problematic concepts as literacy, orality, voice, and self, a study explored the literate practices of a community of women outside the academy who use their reading and writing to enhance their spiritual growth. Subjects were six women (age mid-30s to mid-50s); all were White and members of Al-Anon, the fellowship of friends and relatives of alcoholics based on the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Their education ranged from GED to Master's student. The literate bias of Al-Anon is obvious--members are exhorted to "read the literature." AA's founders, a stockbroker and a physician, seem to have woven middle-class assumptions about the value of literacy into "the program." Since the informants had all been involved in Al-Anon for some time, they were able to talk about spirituality and reading and writing in the same breath. Analysis of 19 hours of audiotape revealed that literacy and spirituality intertwine in rich and complex ways. The women read Al-Anon literature, meditation books, novels, poetry, and for those in university, academic articles and books. They use their reading for escape, identification, knowledge, pleasure, and hope. One important aspect of their reading is the oral conversation that follows as a book is passed around the circle. Although there may not be implications for the college composition classroom, as Peter Elbow says "college is short, life is long." (Contains seven references.) (NKA)

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"A Communion of Friendship":

Literacy, Orality, Voice, and Self Outside the Academy

Last year Lester Faigley invited this meeting of 4Cs to consider literacy "as multiple sets of situated practices" and Anne Gere argued for the study of the "extracurriculum of composition"--that is, writing that goes on outside the academy. This paper responds to both those calls by looking, as John Trimbur recommends, at "how individuals and groups engage in self-formation ... as a practice of everyday life" (130-131). This morning I want to report on the literate practices of a community of women outside the academy who use their reading and writing to enhance their spiritual growth. I hope to convince you that studying actual persons reading for their own purposes can shed some light on such problematic concepts as literacy, orality, voice, and self.

The six women who participated in my study are members of Al-Anon. They range in age from mid-thirties to mid-fifties. Their education is from GED to masters student. All are white. For those of you unfamiliar with it, Al-Anon is, in its own words, "a fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics who share their experience, strength, and hope in order to solve their common problems....The Al-Anon program is based on the Twelve Steps (adapted from Alcoholics Anonymous) which we try, little by little, one day at a time, to apply to our own lives" (Al-Anon

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41). Members of Al-Anon believe that the spiritual awakening that is supposed to result from applying the Twelve Steps to their own lives will allow for solutions to the problems of living with an alcoholic. Attending meetings, talking to others, working the steps, as it is termed--all these lead to "recovery," a term which continues the central illness metaphor of AA.

The literate bias of Al-Anon is obvious. Members are exhorted to "read the literature." Meetings begin with various members reading aloud the Suggested Welcome, the Twelve Steps, the Twelve Traditions, and the day's page in a book entitled One Day at a Time in Al-Anon, but usually called by its acronym, ODAT. Discussion often consists of sharing interpretations of a text in this book or in some other Al-Anon publication. The Fourth Step--"Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves"--is almost universally taken to mean a written inventory; the Eighth Step is usually understood as making a written "list of all persons we had harmed." Those who know the history of AA, the model for Al-Anon, will not find this emphasis on reading and writing surprising: AA's founders, a New York stockbroker and an Akron physician, seem to have woven into the very fabric of "the program," as it is called, middle-class (and Protestant) assumptions about the value of literacy.

Because reading and writing are significant activities in Al-Anon, because Al-Anon claims that its program is inherently spiritual, and because my six informants had been involved in Al-Anon from three to ten years at the time I interviewed them, I expected these women to be able to talk about their spirituality and their reading and writing in the same breath. They did not let

me down. I have 19 hours of audiotape. Analysis of which reveals that spirituality and literacy intertwine in rich and complex ways in these women's lives. Indeed, for these women, there is no such thing as decontextualized literacy, no such dichotomy as orality and literacy, no reading or writing separated from talk.

My informants read Al-Anon literature of course, but they also read or have read books about alcoholism and about families of alcoholics. They read meditation books, some of which are directed specifically at "recovering" persons, some of which are religious in origin or focus. They read novels: Robert B. Parker, author of the Spenser mysteries, Tony Hillerman, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, are great favorites. The poetry of Ntozake Shange has played a significant role. At the time of the interviews, two of the women had returned to the university and so were reading, in their words, "tons" of academic articles and books.

The women I interviewed describe reading for solutions and solace during their early days in "the program." When they discuss their reading, they use terms like escape, identification, knowledge, acceptance, hope, and play and "intense pleasure." Almost all explain how their reading of one central text, the ODAT, has changed over time, and they tell of the central role reading has played in creating a sense of community among them, though it took me a while to see this. Today I want to talk briefly about their reading, first, for identification and acceptance and, then, for distraction; third, for tracking personal growth; and finally, for community. When I report on this research, I am always torn between imposing order on the data and

representing faithfully these women's perceptions of their experiences. This time I'm going to try to let you hear their voices more than mine.

Most of the women I talked with reported reading to find a name for the distress that had brought them to Al-Anon in the first place. (You don't come to Al-Anon if you're fine.) Both Tommie and Lilly describe this reading--that is, reading books on alcoholism or the effects of alcoholism on families--as reading "for identification." They say that such books as Sharon Wegscheder's Another Chance, Claudia Black's It Will Never Happen To Me, and others were helpful. Other informants agreed that these books gave them a name and an explanation for what was going on in their lives. But all of them talked of reading such books once and not going back to them again and again, as they continue to do with Al-Anon literature. The clearest explanation of this phenomenon comes from Jill, who uses the word acceptance. As child, Jill was a victim of incest. During one period of her life, she says, she read everything in the public library and almost everything in the university library about the sexual abuse of children. She sought this material out because, as she puts it, "I wanted to get better." She continues, "The reading did not make me better, but there was an acceptance. Yes, it did help, accepting that it happened to others and seeing, well, this is a common thing that happens when you're abused. Then I could say, yes, I do that. And I'm not crazy. It's because this is from the abuse." Once the problem is defined and given a name, it can be accepted, and then these women go on to work on personal change.

In periods of personal change, my informants again use reading. In this stage, they continue reading Al-Anon books, but here they read also, as they put it, for distraction and for play. Here are the murder mysteries, the movie star biographies, the science fiction stories, romances, and serious literary works like Beloved and One Hundred Years of Solitude. Lilly explains that this kind of reading gets people out of "intense focus" on their own lives, problems, and attempts to change. This is how she explains it:

> You can work too hard at something. I can focus so intently on change, on growing, and work so hard that I get stuck in the work and then there is no change. I believe greatly in distraction, in play. [In my life I had learned to work, but] I didn't understand the importance of play and laughter. There is a distraction of beauty, laughter, and joy that allows you to participate in the change without needing to have power over it. But I had always thought reading had to do with school and learning. It was not a fun thing. It was not a soothing thing. I have realized that reading is an intense pleasure. That, in recovery, has just blossomed.

So these women read for identification, for acceptance, and then for fun and for beauty, for distraction from the intense emotional work of change. But reading also seems to be the way that these women track personal change. This is particularly evident in what they say about One Day at a Time in Al-Anon, the ODAT. Reading this book appears to be an essential part of being

in Al-Anon, and almost all of my informants report that their reading of this text changed over time. The account of the most condensed and concrete changes comes from Judy, who told me of her experiences with the ODAT during the first few weeks of her membership in Al-Anon:

> At my first meeting...I was like an Ethiopian getting food for the first time. I kept saying, Where can I get this book you people are reading out of? I have to have this. I knew that book had to be important because everybody there had one of them blue books. So I got my ODAT book, brought it home and read it from front to back. Didn't understand a damn word of it, but I was just hungering for it. Then I learned, at the second meeting, that I could look in the back, at the index, for topics and read that way. About the third or fourth meeting, I finally saw the dates at the top of the page. It took me a month to start reading the page for the day.

But personal growth means changes in interpretation over longer periods of time as well, as Tommie explains: "You read the ODAT every day, and three years later, you say, I never saw that in there before, and I know I've read that a hundred times. So it lets me know what I'm supposed to think about. I think this happens because we grow and change, and then there's an evolution in our reading, too. We get it when we're ready to receive it, ready to feel it." And Lilly says of her reading of the ODAT:

When I started reading it, to me it was a lot of Hallmark stuff and I didn't like that at all. Platitudes. Slogans. Very trite. But I was so lost and so desperate I was willing to do anything. And the meetings felt right. So when people suggested I do certain things, I just did them. And the ODAT was one of them. And it grew on me. I began to realize I could take what I liked and leave the rest. And, over time, there was a lot to take.

Then [Lilly continues] I went through a phase where it really began to irritate me again. The main focus seemed to me to be spouses and that you needed to do all these things so the whole house would be better or the relationship would be better or the marriage would be better, that there was less focus on you doing this so you would be better. The focus was on you doing this so all this other would be better. That was the thing made me the craziest. Now, I realize that has to do with the language and the attitudes of the times, which is why they're rewriting it. But I got so angry once I just threw it. It hit the wall in the kitchen and I broke the back of my book. But I kept reading, because it was important when I started.

And [Lilly goes on] it's changed again. Right now it has things to say that I didn't realize were quite so spiritual when I had read them over the first nine years. They have gotten more spiritual and that probably has to do with me. It's always been there. But as you change, you can just see things differently.

Given this explanation, I asked, "Was the spiritual message always in the text or are you now bringing it to the text?" Lilly's reply: "I can't be absolutely sure. I do believe that something was always there. I don't know how much was there. So I don't know exactly what I bring to it in terms of adding to it, [but] I do."

Jennifer has a similar view of the relationship of texts and meaning. In one conversation, we talked not about reading the ODAT, but about reading other types of spiritual texts, when Jennie explained:

> Anything I read I can find spirituality in it. Even a comic strip in the newspaper. If the person is writing a message, trying to make a specific point, and that paper goes to 20,000 people, not all 20,000 readers will get what the writer is saying, but for maybe 200 people, it might make an impact on them.

And so, I asked, "So spirituality is not on the page, not in the text, but in the reader?" "Well," Jen replied, "in the writer and the reader. So in a sense it's in the text. But unless you know what it is--unless it's something you'd recognize and that's going to make a difference in your life, you probably won't pick up on it."

These comments remind me of nothing so much as Stanley Fish's discussion of the Areopagitica." According to Fish, Milton first argues that virtue (or meaning or, in the case of my

informants, spirituality) resides not in a book, not in an object, but in ourselves, yet Milton immediately asserts, still according to Fish, that virtue (or meaning or spirituality) is not in us to start with, but is made, created, brought into being by our interactions with the text. None of these women has ever heard of Stanley Fish, or engaged in any formal study of theories of reading or interpretation. They do not normally spend time talking about the indeterminacy of the text or about the location of meaning. Nonetheless these concepts appear to be illustrated in these women's accounts of their reading.

So far I've talked about how my informants read to create change, first, by finding names for the things in their lives that cause them pain, that is by identifying the problem; second, by distracting themselves from the problem and from intense emotional work so that change can occur; and third, by tracking the internal changes by noting how reading the ODAT changes over time.

But for my informants reading also creates community. I interviewed the first--and I thought only--five informants over the course of two summers. After the transcripts were done and as I began to study them, I began to see them less as individual women who knew each other and more as a community of women, with a central leadership role being played by Lilly. So I returned to talk to Lilly.

Indeed, I would argue now, the most important aspect of the reading of these women is the oral conversation that follows as a book is passed around the circle. It is in these conversations, more than in the reading itself, that these women--and I use bell hooks' terms here--"move from being object to being subject," that

they "come to voice" (12). Hooks argues that "finding a voice" is "a metaphor for self-transformation," one that is "especially relevant for groups of women who have previously never had a public voice, women who are speaking and writing for the first time..." (12). According to Lilly, when someone in the group reads a book and it touches feelings, then that person lends the book to someone else who reads it and then they begin the talk about it. Then others read it and join the conversation. Lilly explains:

> What happens is that recovery is a part of all of that discussion even though it isn't the main focus of the discussion. It seems to help the recovery grow because the feelings have been touched by whatever it is that's been read. That's been a real vibrant part. But it might take two years before it makes it around to everybody, because people work and have kids and are busy. People have become friends. We're no longer just in recovery together but we've moved past that to a communion of friendship. That has changed how recovery works.

A specific example comes in Lilly's report of the reading of Alice Walker's Temple of My Familiar. This is Lilly:

> [In this book] the husband and wife were close. Any time he read something that was important--I love this--she would read it because she wanted to know what was important to him. And every time she read something that was important, she

would give it to him but he would never read it. There ended up being a stack next to his desk of these books that were very important to her that he was going to read and that he never read. She finally saw the stack of books and she realized that was a little murder. He loved her and was very interested in what she was interested in, but not enough to read the books.

This idea of little murders in relationships hit me real hard. I had all kinds of feelings about that, and I wanted to talk about it, and so I gave it to Tommie and, uh, somebody else. And that concept was really important for all of us. We all started talking about how positive finding little murders was, but how you can take it into a negative if you begin to see everything in terms of little murders. Are we then saying that happens in relationships? What do we share? What is it in terms of kindness and courtesy with each other? Is it just please's and thank-you's, or is it reading the book if somebody says it was real important to them? So that was wonderful. That was the biggest thing we got from Temple of My Familiar.

This practice of reading and talking began, Lilly says, with Ntozake Shange's for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf:

I saw [the play] in New York. And I literally carried it in my purse for years. It was the first thing that gave me the sense that it could get better, that something could help it get better. I started reading sections of it to people I got

close to. Then [later] we would take turns reading it. One time we had a gathering of about six women. What was interesting was the comments about what people liked. Some of them liked the anger. Someone liked the one about the plant--leaving it on his door--'I'm ending this affair'--and the assertiveness in terms of men--'You can water it your own damn self.' I loved watching what people liked. And we talked a lot about it. The more conversation we added about it, the fuller everything got, because there were so many different ways to look at one poem, depending on who felt what from it. Then I got to using it in my [Al-Anon story], the last few lines: 'I found God in myself and I loved her. I loved her fiercely.' That was the impact of the whole book to me. And that's what I wanted to find. The lending started with that and it grew from that. So other books opened the world of recovery to the world.

The voices I have shared with you today come from outside the academy, and in their talk of reading there is very little talk of school or of the kinds of reading we teach in literature classes. That kind of reading becomes almost an irrelevancy in this group of women, where reading is a matter of life and where interpretation--meaning--begins with feeling and is something to be shared, discussed, questioned not for abstract reasons, but for immediate, personal, and social ones. The conversation creates what Lilly calls a communion of friendship, where these women use literacy and orality to form and re-form voice and self as they practice everyday life.

I am not ready to assert implications of my research for the college composition classroom. But I am reminded as I listen to these voices that in Rhetoric and Irony Jan Swearingen says that "teaching how to write and how to read is teaching voice and self" (234) and that my friend JoAnn Campbell is fond of quoting Peter's Elbow's insight that "college is short and life is long" (136).

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